

Author explores condor extinction

Book follows quest to save birds

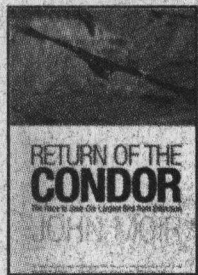
By JENNIE TEZAK

OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

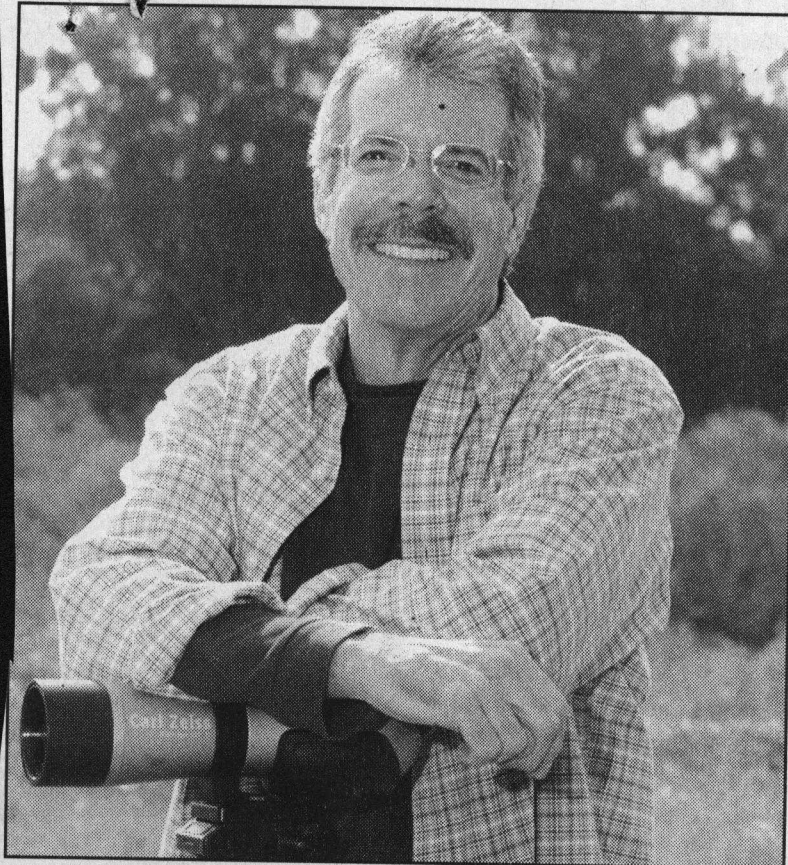
Author and Elkhorn Slough docent John Moir was hiking in the Los Padres National Forest in the 1970s when two huge California condors flew across the sky.

The rare birds instantly captivated Moir. At the time, there were only 30 condors left in the world. Today, due to the animals being bred in captive breeding facilities in places like California and Oregon, there are now 300. Over the last 15 years, captive breeding facilities have bred several hundred birds and released some of them into the wild.

Moir began writing articles on the effort to save



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Contributed

John Moir, author of "Return of the Condor: The Race to Save Our Largest Bird from Extinction," poses recently.

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the condors and completed an article in Birding magazine, earning him a first-place award for nonfiction at the East of Eden Writing Conference at the National Steinbeck Center.

The article led to his book called "Return of the Condor: The Race to Save Our Largest Bird from Extinction" that was published last week.

"I wanted to tell a good story about a bird I had fallen in love with and I'm hoping it will encourage people to see condors," he said. "More than 120 of them have been released in the wild; more than a dozen were released an hour south of Watsonville at the Pinnacles."

Moir said he also had another goal while writing the book.

"I have an umbrella issue, I want to draw attention to the loss of species on our planet," he said. "Condors are symbolic of other birds, fish and plants that have been lost or on the brink of extinction. What intrigued me is how best to save this bird raises questions about science and how to save endangered species."

Moir said the goal is to draw the birds away from captive breeding and to breed them in the wild.

He said the perception of condors is that they are loners, but in fact they are quite social.

"Biologists call them flying primates because they are so smart and social and interact well with each other," he said. "When you

think of the condor you think of a lone bird flying in the sky, but they actually mate for life and have long and complex relationships. A lot of learning and communication is transferred back and forth."

Condors feed on carrion, or dead animals, at "kill sites" where carcasses of animals lay. Condors feed on large animals like deer, cattle, feral pigs and even sea mammals such as whales and seals. Condors have to defend themselves from other animals such as ravens or coyotes that flock to the site to feed on the carcasses.

"Kill sites are dangerous places and condors have evolved to be astute learners," Moir said. "They are exquisitely attuned to their environment. One of the things that intrigued me is that they are one of the smartest birds on the planet."

Since human interaction with condors is discouraged to keep the birds from becoming too tame, Moir felt lucky to have once observed a condor from two to three feet away.

"It was an amazing experience," he said. "To see them up close and watch their eyes blink and see the range of colors on their heads and bills was amazing."

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To learn more about Moir and his book, visit www.returnofthecondor.com. Moir will give a presentation about the book Thursday at 7 p.m. in the Seminar Room at the Moss Landing Marine Labs at 8272 Moss Landing Road and Oct. 30 at Capitola Book Café at 1475 41st Ave. in Capitola.